This submission is made on behalf of Northern Grampians Shire Council (NGSC) who remain concerned at the deteriorating state of the arterial road network, the long term reduced capital and maintenance funding by successive Governments, the gradual removal of Vicroads divisional offices and resources from regional Victoria, the downsides of contracting out works and a range of associated issues that have affected the road network to the point that many parts of the network are unsafe and dangerous to the travelling public.

It is of some concern by the authors that such a negative submission needs to be made about one of the main Government organisations that a Council deals with on a regular basis. However, the details need to be publicly aired, reviewed and resolved as a matter of urgency as the groundswell of public opinion increases dramatically in relation to the state of the arterial road network.

It should be noted that the relationship between Local Government and Vicroads is of paramount importance to the provision of a good and safe road network for the travelling public. While this relationship has always been very valued by both parties, it appears that in recent years it has become less valued and not as important as it once was. Council staff have a very good relationship with the local Vicroads Managers and few staff that remain in country areas, but as funding has dried up, the interconnection continues to be of lesser importance. This submission is not meant to be a criticism of local staff, but more in regard to, Government policies and lack of funding on a wide range of matters that have seen the whole organisation and arterial road network decline in recent years.

Recent efforts by the current Government to inject additional funds to address the problems are welcome, but it still appears to be much too little, and much too late. Council requests that there needs to be a concerted effort by all parties to:-

[i] Provide an immediate and substantial allocation of additional capital and maintenance funds to arrest the deterioration of the arterial road network, plus increased ongoing annual funding for a suggested minimum five [5] year period until the network is an acceptable and safe condition. This special allocation needs to over and above current funding levels and be specifically identified and targeted to address the widespread issues.

[ii] Provide additional resources to Vicroads in regional areas to enable the effective planning, management and expenditure of the additional funds required to restore the network to a safe standard that is acceptable for today's traffic requirements.
This should include the provision of additional staff and resources into the main regional centres, such as at Horsham and Mildura to make sure that there are more eyes and ears on the ground to properly oversee the network. For example, the gradual demise of the regional offices back to Ballarat and Bendigo could not be considered a success and has resulted in a loss of expertise and local knowledge of the full regional network.

[iii] Seriously consider the re-establishment of using Vicroads own in-house maintenance crews for at least the basic maintenance operations, including inspections, patrol crews, minor patching, accident repairs to road furniture etc.. This should allow at least earlier intervention in the smaller tasks and provide better coverage of the network. The current contract patrol crews have enormous areas to cover and do it poorly. The total contracting out experience as implemented by Vicroads in the past 20 years could not be considered a success in anyone’s view and has been a costly experience at the expense of short term financial expediency. Unfortunately this exercise will be difficult, if not impossible to change as the Vicroads depots, staff and equipment were mostly sold off, leaving the Vicroads program delivery entirely at the mercy of the bigger contractors.

[v] Completely review the costs and effectiveness of contracting out all of the main construction and maintenance works, including the poor outcomes as evident by the so-called “Quality Management” contracts. It is quite evident that either the system is broken, there are major flaws in Quality Assurance Systems that allow contractors to take short-cuts, there are serious deficiencies in the designs, there is inadequate or poor supervision and oversight of these contracts, or all of the above. Recent examples of Vicroads contract works such as on the Western Highway duplication and many other projects seems to indicate that construction works are failing well before they should be, therefore requiring additional funds that should be spent on other much needed projects. As long as the completed works reach the end of the maintenance period, is all the contractors are concerned about. While this may seem like a cynical view, any post contract failures are then another funded job to make money on. The Government and the public have been short changed on many of these projects. The main aim of the contracting business is to make profits for their owners and this has not, and will probably never change.

[v] The increased use of consultants by Vicroads since their downsizing needs to be reviewed. As there becomes less and less experienced design and supervision staff at Vicroads, their dependence and reliance on consultants must have increased. The problem with this is that there is no independent / in-house check on the consultants and their cost will generally be more than in-house staff, with limited expert oversight. The number of qualified and experienced Vicroads staff overseeing the consultants has to have decreased and this will only lead to bad outcomes. This practice also leads to more design and construct contracts where shortcuts and cost saving measures between the consultants and contractors are easily put in place.

[vi] Make sure that the now severely neglected arterial “C”-Roads in the State are specifically included in the review by the Committee’s Inquiry and that these are not relegated to the current very low priority by Vicroads for funding of any works. The Western Region especially, has 2739 kilometres of arterial “C” roads which forms 22% of the States non-metro network, and is the highest of any of the regions. This is also the highest regionally, at 32 % of the total size of regional Victoria. The arterial “C” road network is vital to this area and while it may have lower traffic volumes, lower road
accident statistics and a lower population than some of the other regional areas and the metro area, it is still of fundamental importance to the overall economy and financial well being of Victoria.

2. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VICROADS IN MANAGING COUNTRY ROADS;

As summarised above, it is evident that something is seriously lacking in the management and funding of the arterial road network in country Victoria, and presumably this is why the Committee is conducting this Inquiry.

The marked deterioration of the network commenced way back in the mid-nineties following Council amalgamations and radical changes implemented by successive Governments with downsizing, selling off plant and equipment, contracting out, rationalising Vicroads divisional offices, so-called cost cutting measures and like mentality.

It is no coincidence that very similar problems with the railway network set the groundwork for a significant increase in the number and size of heavy vehicles using the road network to the point that the majority of road damages can be attributed directly to the growth of the road transport industry. High axle / wheel loads from trucks are the singular most significant cause of pavement failures, and the damages are exponentially proportional to that axle load.

It is of great concern to see the dozens of grain storages alongside the railway lines throughout the Wimmera-Mallee area, mostly all carting out via road transport instead of using the rail network. The cartage of this grain to port should all be going by rail, and the consequences of this cartage by increasingly larger and heavier road vehicles has seen untold damages to the arterial network which Vicroads has clearly been unable to address with their current resources and funding. To make matters worse, this cartage is occuring 24/7 and critically, throughout winter when road sub-grades are at their lowest strength resulting in whole sections of damaged pavement. This damage often has to go unrepaired for extended periods due to the wet weather conditions and inability to repair them when wet, which only exacerbates the damages and road safety until finally repaired.

Other problems evident to Council are:-

[i] The increased proliferation of wire rope fences, supposedly on the basis of improved road safety. There is a public perception that these are a waste of scarce funds which should be getting spent on much needed road repairs ie/. If the roads were in good order then less drivers would be running off the road. The barriers also cause a problem for motorcyclists, with fire control access, severely limit roadside slashing and completely block grader access to cleaning out essential chute drains. Their location also usually involves the removal or filling in of essential table drains at the sides of roads thus increasing the likelihood of future sub-grade water logging problems affecting the road pavements, which is civil engineering lesson 101.

While Council appreciates that more funding for more wire rope barriers is a seen as an essential safety measure by Vicroads, Council believes that due to the state of the road network itself, the scarce funds should be spent of the road condition and actual road safety issues first, and then only on barriers after the roads are in a safe and acceptable order. It would appear that their funding is mainly from TAC funds which have to be earmarked for safety improvement jobs, not road jobs, which is illogical and needs to be reviewed. Their use should therefore be curtailed and only be used in seriously high crash sites for the time being. New Zealand for example has a much higher proportion
of mountainous, hilly and winding arterial roads, yet rarely uses either wire rope or traditional armco type guardrails.

[ii] The increased amount of rubbish and litter along most arterial roads is clearly evident. This task seems to have taken a backseat to higher priority maintenance jobs, but it is essential to ensure that the countryside is presented in a more aesthetic manner for the general public, visitors and tourists alike. The presence of rubbish everywhere is an eyesore and reflects on not only Vicroads, but also the Government and Councils. Probably the only reason there are not more complaints about the rubbish is because the grass is so long from not being cut that the public cannot see it until the verge slashing occurs.

[iii] The decreased amount of general maintenance is starkly evident, and it is understood that the last Auditor-General report showed this decline at 60% since 2010-11. That significant reduction just cannot be sustainable and the end result is exactly what we are currently seeing in the condition of the network. This reduction applies to not only the litter as above, but to the reducing frequency of verge slashing plus slashing of roadsides at intersections and on the insides of curves for sight distance. Overhanging trees that are regularly hit by high vehicles, potholes, shoulder holes, depressions and the like go unaddressed for days and weeks without even a warning sign erected, and much longer for the defect to be attended to. The new norm is for “temporary” speed or “rough surface” signs to be erected at each side of the defect and no repairs carried out for extended periods, if at all.

As a good example of reduced maintenance effort, the Grampians Rd through the township of Halls Gap has had very little or no shoulder grading, verge slashing or table drain works carried out on it for many years, to the point that parts are now dangerous. This section of Grampians Rd passes through a prime tourist and visitor attraction of International importance, and yet presents as a shabby, unsafe and unaesthetic arterial road for much of its length.

There are also many examples of serious holes, depressions and pavement “shoving” effects on the regions Highway network generally that are not even signed at all, giving no warning to drivers, and especially motorcyclists who are more vulnerable to these serious defects.

Previous intervention levels which have always been considered the safe minimum and included in maintenance contracts seem to have disappeared or been severely cut back to match scarce funds.

This is a sad reflection on our road network and is the root cause of a lot of community angst. Some of this concern even comes back to local Councils as a significant number of people do not distinguish between a Vicroads “arterial” road and a Council “local” road, especially in the urban areas.

[iv] Prior to contracting out of maintenance services, Vicroads own patrolmen would regularly inspect / patrol the arterial network and attend to many defects and repairs as they found them, promptly and efficiently. Under the contract system, it is understood that a Vicroads inspector marks the defect on the ground, measures and logs it as a defect, this goes through to the contractor who then may get a crew there in due course, then after getting repaired the inspector has to revisit the site, inspect the work and pay the contractor. Any efficiencies gained from contracting out are soon lost with the additional inspections and paperwork. It used to be common practice for contractors to leave a small pothole to get bigger, as they received a higher contract rate for the larger holes.
It is also evident that even when major patching jobs are carried out, their effectiveness is generally short lived for several reasons.

- The areas marked out and treated are often smaller than what should be carried out, and don’t extend to similar sections of distressed pavement adjacent. It is therefore only a matter of time until another patch is required nearby.
- The quality of the major patching leaves a lot to be desired. Special contract crews usually do this in a whole series of jobs linked together, and possibly due to tight funding and timelines, the patches often fail within a short period, some within days. Either they aren’t using the right techniques, the repair is not deep enough, compaction effort is insufficient, there is little or no oversight, they use inexperienced staff or all of the above.

[v] From observations and discussions with Vicroads staff and contractors, the average interval or cycle time for reseals of the arterial network has been slowly extended from somewhere around 10 years to now in excess of 20 years. This equates to only about 4% to 5% of the network being resealed each year, which must have a telling effect on the overall network performance. The timing of reseals can have a profound effect on the condition and life of a road pavement and this decision must be questioned. It can be compared directly to painting a house, if it is done in a timely manner then the cost will be a fraction of having to significantly repair or replace the structure itself. An associated issue with the reseal timing is the amount of preparation and repair items that are carried out prior to the reseal, such as crack sealing, pothole repairs, edge-break repairs etc.. It would appear that not only is the reseal cycle being extended, but the amount of preparation work is being kept to an absolute minimum also, which can then seriously affect the life of the reseal and pavement. There have been examples noted locally of existing pavement failures being simply resealed, instead of being properly repaired first, plus newly re-sealed roads showing distress or potholes within several years due to the lack of preparation works. This should be of serious concern to the Committee and the Government.

[vi] At the same time that the Vicroads budget was being reduced, Victoria was experiencing one of the longest drought periods on record. That dry period resulted in a false impression that the road network was in better shape than it actually was, due to the resultant dryer sub-grades. This made the reduced funding and effort on the roads appear to be ok for an extended period, when it clearly wasn’t. The problem being that when the wetter seasons returned, the sub-grade problems surfaced very quickly and whole sections of what were thought to be stable roads, suddenly failed.

An associated issue was the false impression that both construction and maintenance activities were able to be carried out during the normally wet months by contractors, when they historically cannot be. Several Vicroads jobs were noticed whereby construction activities were trying to be completed during wet periods. This can only result in further failures, expensive rework required, lengthy periods of reduced speed limits through ongoing roadworks and the resultant community angst.

[vii] Native vegetation controls in Victoria are too complex and have got out of hand, especially for road construction and maintenance activities by Vicroads and Councils. While there are some exemptions available and we have learned to live with them, they can severely impact on the ability to carry out road improvement and maintenance activities in a timely manner. This is evident in the increasing amount of expensive wire rope being installed [as in [1] above], rather than remove an unsafe offending trees that
are too close to the road edge. Trees that restrict sight distance at corners are generally not exempt and should be. Any tree within the “road corridor” should be able to be trimmed, lopped or removed by exemption without resorting to the long winded and expensive bureaucratic process that currently exists. The Regulations have also just been amended again and are onerous, expensive and time consuming. Another example is Grampians Road through the Grampians National Park, where the road shoulders and verge are no longer slashed or trimmed back well behind the white post line as they used to be, resulting in regrowth right out to the shoulder edges. This is particularly dangerous in that it severely restricts motorists sight distance to see the increasing numbers of kangaroos, emus, deer and goats present in the Park and for which motorists have little or no warning of their presence due to the regrowth. There are many other arterial roads through forest and park areas similar to this, and it appears that Vicroads are not willing to take Parks Victoria on, despite the fact the road reserves are not part of the National Parks. Wire rope barriers are definitely not the answer there either, the verges should be simply cleared back and maintained at a safe setback, as they once used to be.

[viii] Prior to Council amalgamations, most Councils generally carried out the construction and maintenance of many of the main roads within their own area. This work was carried out under the direction of Vicroads, at their cost and based on annual and forward programs. This arrangement worked very well and not only delivered the program efficiently and in a cost effective manner, but kept the workforce locally and allowed those Councils to deliver a better service for their own roads. It meant that the local Council staff knew their roads, knew the problems and knew how to fix them. Following amalgamations in 1995, the Vicroads funding started to dry up and restrictions with very onerous Vicroads contract requirements [Quality Management Systems, pre-registration etc] meant that the majority of Councils relinquished this work by the mid-2000’s as it was just not worth the effort and funding was insufficient to properly maintain the arterial network to a safe and acceptable standard. NGSC initially retained this work under contract but would now not want any part of it due to the restrictions imposed on that contract work. This situation has not changed since and only a hand-full of Councils carry out this work anymore. The network has gone downhill ever since Vicroads took them back over.

[ix] Arterial road reclassifications. Probably as a pure cost cutting measure, this issue has been looked at previously by Vicroads on several occasions, with a view to reclassifying some lesser used arterial “C” roads back to local roads under Council control. As this issue will no doubt be raised again in this Inquiry as a further cost cutting measure by Vicroads, NGSC would not agree to any reclassification unless it was cost neutral. i.e. If an arterial road was taken over by Council as a local road, then an equivalent length of local road would need to be reclassified as an arterial road, or alternatively an up-front payment to Council to cover the on-going funding for the full life of the asset. While NGSC has agreed to one such reclassification in St Arnaud township, it was only on the basis of an equal swap of a local road being reclassified up to an arterial road, thus resulting in an approximate no-nett cost outcome for both Vicroads and Council.

NGSC also has one particular link route [via Banyena Rd] through the northern part of the Shire that is regularly used by heavy transport operators travelling interstate as a shortcut between Bendigo and Dimboola, through to Adelaide. Very few, if any heavy vehicles have B-Double permits for this route, yet they continue to use it daily rather than
the Wimmera Highway arterial route, as it is over 20kms shorter. Council has previously requested this route be added to the arterial network, to no avail. This needs to be reviewed.

[ix] The reaction times and availability of the Vicroads contractors to accidents and natural disasters such as trees over roads is now much less than desirable. This is most likely due to the very large areas their patrol crews now have to cover, and if not in the particular area at the time of the event, it can often be hours until they get signage or traffic control in place to attend the scene. This is just not good enough for water or trees over the road for example where a quick response is required, or in larger events the Shire crews are regularly called out to assist as the contractors just do not have the number of staff or crews available. The SES also regularly attend to trees over arterial roads, when these volunteers crews should be left to address private property and other community emergencies, not jobs that should be a Vicroads responsibility. An associated problem is that as police are generally the first respondents to an accident or traffic hazard, and in the absence of the Vicroads contractors, they often redirect traffic around the scene onto nearby local roads. This is not in accordance with the accepted protocol by Vicroads to only redirect traffic onto alternative arterial roads, not local roads. This has been seen to cause utter confusion by redirected drivers trying to work out the alternative routes which are not set up with detour signs. We have seen many examples such as where large numbers of heavy trucks [B-doubles, PBS, OSOM vehicles etc] have been redirected by police at Western Hwy crashes onto narrow seal local roads which are not even gazetted as B-double routes, and with no checking of their suitability for pavement strength, bridge strengths, seal width or intersection safety for larger vehicles. Council has previously had similar problems with local roads being used and subsequent costly pavement failure repairs required. In the absence of any early traffic control, many other drivers use their in car GPS to try and find shortcuts onto the nearest local roads, often with very confused drivers on roads they are not familiar with. This practice is unsafe and can only be addressed by additional patrol and traffic management crews being available in all areas. Under the pre-contract days, patrol crews were generally available in most towns and areas to provide a prompt response.

[x] A good example of what a State Road Authority can achieve with a long term funded strategic plan can be seen in this area, immediately over the SA / Vic border where the Dukes Highway has been slowly upgraded over recent years to be a fine example of what a single two-way carriageway should look like. This Highway has been upgraded and widened for most of its whole length to now consist of wide traffic lanes, good shoulders and most importantly it includes a unique separated centreline of 1.2m wide that gives an important safety separation to the opposing traffic lanes. The SA Government and their Roads Authority have obviously catered for the high traffic numbers overall and the high heavy truck numbers on this important inter-city arterial Highway and funded it accordingly. It is now a pleasure to drive and accident statistics have dropped accordingly. Victoria should follow suit on all major routes, especially the Western Hwy where it is not to be duplicated from Stawell to the SA border.
3. THE EXISTING FUNDING MODEL AND ITS LACK OF EFFECTIVENESS FOR COUNTRY VICTORIA;

The annual budget cycle of how Vicroads is funded should definitely be reviewed. While Council is not aware of what the current funding model is based on, but it would appear that savings targets are set and Vicroads have to meet them. This is a destructive type of arrangement for the road network assets, because if the target is met, then that can be followed up with another lower target the following year. Coupled with senior staff performance bonuses to meet those targets, there is only one outcome from those with the power to address the problems, and that is less funds for the network. Anyone can cut back funds and do less work, the true professional would fight tooth and nail to retain the funding levels and in fact increase them to match traffic increases and other network demands. It would appear that arterial road assets are looked upon as a liability in the minds of some in Government and cost cutting is the nett outcome, regardless of what funding is required to sustain and build on that asset.

Vicroads and its predecessors were built on a solid foundation of experienced qualified engineers, and for many years was the pre-eminent Victorian body for engineering expertise in road construction and maintenance, road sealing, bridge construction, road design and planning, material testing and a wide range of other related civil disciplines. They provided a top rate cadetship program for young engineers and many Local Government engineers came out of the Vicroads ranks.

However, Vicroads role as the peak road authority in Victoria, with all of that expertise, experience and resources has steadily declined in the past 20 years to the point where it is now just another sub-Department looking after a failing road network that is going to need an enormous injection of funds to repair and get it back on track. This needs to urgently change.

One observation is that as the arterial road network in Melbourne slowly grinds to a halt due to population growth and the relentless increase in traffic volumes, more and more road funds have been, and will continue to be directed to the serious traffic problems in Melbourne and surrounding growth suburbs. This can only be to the detriment of regional Victoria, as we cannot hope to match their traffic volumes, accident statistics and road needs. On a strict cost benefit basis, regional Victoria would probably end up getting no road funds at all and Melbourne would get it all, however Council does not agree with that premise at all. Country Victoria provides a wide range of commercial, agricultural, productivity, mining, tourism, social and community benefits that far outweigh pure traffic numbers and statistics. It has been noted during discussions with Vicroads staff that the amount of funds allocated to regional roads is absolutely minimal, to the point that only the most urgent reseals and maintenance works are being funded. There have been very few reconstructions, intersection upgrades or rehabilitation works carried out on the arterial network in recent years, other than the Western Highway in this region. The “B” class and especially the “C” class roads just do not qualify for any works at all, due to their very low priority on traffic statistics alone.

Council is unaware of how the city / country split of road funds is currently arrived at, but it needs to be fair and equitable and take all regional factors into account. It also needs to factor in the emerging suburbs and growth areas around Melbourne that will always rate higher in need and priority than the regional road network, and therefore further eroding the available road funds to our more remoter regional areas.
Perhaps one funding model option should be to look at a simple funding amount per kilometre of road length in each regional area, and give a lower score to the traffic figures. This would eliminate the need to draw a line between city and country areas.

It is important to note several basic road design principles that considerably affect the cost of road building regardless of where it is located:

[1] The engineering requirements and build standards for say a sealed B-Double road that may take only 10 x B-doubles a day is nearly exactly the same as for a road that takes 100 or more B-doubles a day. Similarly, a modern concrete bridge structure over a creek or river has to comply with exactly the same Australian Standard SM1600 loading and design whether there is a single B-double or 1000 B-doubles a day using it. Therefore road and bridge design requirements and construction costs are comparable whether they are in the city or in a remote location.

[2] The ever increasing size and number of heavy trucks is a very real problem that all road construction authorities are grappling with. The road transport industry is always way ahead of the game and continually pushing Governments and especially the new NHVR to approve larger, longer and heavier vehicle combinations. B-doubles and PBS vehicles are now the norm for most transport tasks and the even larger A-doubles are now starting to appear in many places. The problem with the ever increasing axle weights is that the road network cannot be upgraded at anywhere near the same rate to take those increased loads.

This escalation of the vehicle sizes has been relatively quick and the past bridge design standards are a good illustration of this. See attached copy of the bridge live load standards that generally applied for all Victorian bridges when built ie/. From a 15 tonne tractor in 1950, moving rapidly up to the current standard of 160 tonnes now. However a significant number of Vicroads bridges would be in the 1950 to 1976 period when many of the States highways were upgraded and the applicable standard in that period was only a 33 tonne truck, whereas current B-doubles and PBS vehicles can have a mass of 68 tonnes or more, or double that standard.

Bridges are typically built to a 50 to 100 year life and therefore many of the arterial network bridges would be seriously overloaded with current truck loads. This is evident with the advent of the A-double combinations where it is understood that Vicroads itself has numerous relatively new concrete bridges on freeways and State Highways that require some form of strengthening to be able to be approved for these trucks to use. This upgrade program alone will take many years to complete and will consume a significant amount of their scarce funds.

In respect of the road network, a similar problem exists, with roads designed for a 25 to 50 year life, but in reality both Vicroads and Councils have a wide range of assets that are much older than this. There would be thousands of kilometres of arterial roads that were constructed with only 150mm to 300mm of local gravel pavements and which are still being used today. Many of these were originally a single sealed lane, subsequently widened as traffic volumes increased and trucks got larger post WW2 and through the 1960's and 70's to the vehicles of today. These road pavements are so fragile that any lack of maintenance, reduced reseal interval, poor drainage, wet winters or the like will very quickly result in severe pavement failure, and that is exactly what has, and is occuring with the arterial network in so many rural areas.
There is simply no way that the whole road network can be brought up to the current vehicle standards overnight, if ever.

At the very least there needs to be a halt to the axle loads and mass of heavy vehicles unless the industry and the community are willing to pay for that increase to fund the necessary road and bridge upgrades far quicker than what they will be. The same problems as above are being experienced by Councils with their local road networks, but probably to a more marked extent. Local Government overall would generally have more older assets and less funding to upgrade them, so the problem is even more exacerbated than the arterial network. This is why Councils have a huge unfunded asset renewal gap which is worsening year by year.

4. THE LACK OF CONSULTATION WITH REGIONAL COMMUNITIES AND THEIR SUBSEQUENT LACK OF INPUT INTO PRIORITISING WHICH ROADS ARE IN DIRE NEED OF REPAIR;

For many years, VicRoads relied on annual inspections by senior staff and regular input from their Divisional Engineers / Offices. There was also a lot more interaction with Councils on a range of local issues where information and feedback was constantly given and received. As the regional offices diminished their presence and with less experienced staff on the ground, there has probably been less on-ground inspections and feedback to head office, although Council is not conversant with VicRoads current internal procedures, inspections and reporting systems to comment as to their effectiveness or otherwise. This should all be reviewed as part of the Inquiry to try and ascertain where the current problems lie.

It must be noted however, that the internal systems and procedures of VicRoads either do not work properly, or advice about the state of the arterial network has been ignored at somewhere in the management chain of responsibility. It has been quite clear to the general public and Council officers for some years that a serious problem was emerging with the arterial network and very little was being done to address that problem.

For the so-called amount of specialist road inspections being carried out by VicRoads in Victoria using their own staff, hi-tech equipment and consultants, there appears to be a major problem in either the usefulness or analysis of that information. There is no way that the state of the network could not have been picked up much earlier than it has been and actions taken many years ago. This data collection and information must have been evident and the only logical conclusion is that the data has been suppressed or deliberately kept in-house to meet Government policy and funding shortfalls. The Inquiry should review all data as collected in the past decade and review all reports and contract reviews as held by VicRoads to see where the problems lie.

It would appear that VicRoads has very recently taken on board some of the concerns of the general community in regard to the state of the arterial road network. This has been evident in recent regional site inspections, meetings and consultation as evident in the Country Roads-Your insights / our actions-Engagement Project. Unfortunately, this effort has been belated and there is probably a large proportion of the public that either did not know of, or who could not be bothered to make a submission on what should be an important topic. A quick look at the number of submissions made to that project shows a distinct lack of comment overall, and specifically in this area that bears out this non-interest.

It is noted that while VicRoads relies heavily on their website for information gathering and dissemination of information, it would be interesting to review exactly what percentage of the
motoring public actually use this site or other electronic devices. It is a common fallacy by many Government Departments that the majority of the population has instant access to a computer and use it for all purposes. This is just not the case for many members of the public, especially older members, and there needs to be much more face to face consultation, regular and more widely held meetings with public groups and organisations, especially Councils and Council staff. There needs to be an ongoing program using many more methods than just the internet to capture the true extent of the problem and the feelings of the general motoring public. This program needs to be ongoing and not be closed off as a specific project, as has occurred to date. The lack of available experienced senior VicRoads personnel in the country areas due to the downsizing and cutbacks over many years is most likely the root cause of this loss of touch with their local communities. This needs to be urgently addressed.

NGSC has for some years compiled a running list of desirable and outstanding jobs and projects on arterial roads within the Shire area. [Refer attached updated list] This list is regularly reviewed and conveyed to VicRoads when the opportunity arises, however the vast majority of the jobs remain unfunded and unaddressed by VicRoads. Over the past five [5] years or so, Council has even resorted to funding some fifteen [15] of the local road / arterial road intersection jobs using Council’s own source and grant funds, even though it is not their responsibility to do so under the demarcation rules. This work has in part been carried out in frustration at the lack of attention by VicRoads to funding their arterial roads adequately, and to make sure the users of the adjacent local road network can do so in a safer and better manner. Council has been able to tie their own funding in with the State Local Roads To Market and Federal Govt Heavy Vehicle funding programs to address these intersections jobs to enable their use by B-doubles on our designated heavy vehicle routes mainly.

VicRoads has recently acknowledged this work and has provided some seed funds towards the more recent jobs and a forward program is being developed to jointly fund further arterial road intersections. Out of all the arterial jobs outstanding, it is of particular concern that the Wimmera-Mallee region still has quite a number of arterial roads that still have “narrow”, single lane seal widths [seal width 5.0m or 4.3m or less]. As a good example, the Murtoa-Glenorchy Rd in this Shire has numerous sections that have a narrow seal and extremely poor condition gravel shoulders. This road provides a vital transport link from the Stawell-Warracknabeal Rd at Glenorchy, through to Murtoa. It is used by a lot of heavy trucks, including B-doubles for cartage of grain to and from the extensive Murtoa grain receival silos. The condition of the road shoulders has been deplorable for many years, and especially during wet periods, the shoulders are slippery and dangerous for any vehicles that have to get off the seal for approaching trucks and at the very least the shoulders require urgent upgrade, if not sealed.

5. THE OPTION OF DISMANTLING VICROADS AND CREATING A SPECIFIC COUNTRY ROADS ORGANISATION AND SEPARATE METROPOLITAN ROADS BODY.

How history repeats itself. VicRoads was born out of the original Country Roads Board and other mainly city based Traffic and Transport organisations and the VicRoads website details these changes and dates.

While a specific Country Roads organisation may have some merit in theory, the advantages and disadvantages would need to be weighed up very carefully. Of more importance would
be how such an organisation would be funded, where would it be based and would it make an appreciable difference to rural regional roads? The same fight for funding would remain, regardless of whether it remains as one body, or as a separate body. Country Victoria just does not have the voting numbers to out-vote the city and growth areas and this will not change with whatever model is adopted.

The costs of duplication of another body would need to be closely examined, along with exactly where the split would be to define its boundaries. It could well be that the boundary split is so close to Melbourne that the outer growth areas would still use the majority of available funds to the detriment of the more remote rural areas, with no discernable difference to the current model.

Councils view would be to retain Vicroads, but restore it as the pre-eminent roads body, fix the structural problems and most importantly, for the Government to provide a significant increase in road funding to address the current numerous issues. Among other things, this would require the employment of experienced road engineers to lead the organisation and to make the critical asset decisions that will be required to be made. The experiments with non-engineer or inexperienced personnel as senior management in some Government transport areas could not be seen as a success and needs to be addressed.

6. ATTACHMENTS;
- Copy of Bridge design standard loads versus key dates
- Summary of Vicroads Arterial Road & Related Issues For Discussion [V9@ 11 JAN 2018]

Submission drafted on behalf of Council by:-

1/Trenton Fithall-Manager Infrastructure

Signed

AND-

2/ Allan Ralph-Contract Consultant

Signed...

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